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Lucia A Keegan 09/20/2006 10:02:39 AM From DB/Inbox: Lucia A Keegan

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 PARIS 006275

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 6/14/2016  
TAGS: [PREL](#) [LE](#) [SY](#) [IS](#) [FR](#)  
SUBJECT: MFA OFFICIAL SAYS FRANCE WANTS A SYMBOLIC QUARTET  
MEETING

Classified By: Political Minister-Counselor Josiah Rosenblatt, reasons  
1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: In a June 18 meeting, MFA DAS-equivalent Herve Besancenot (protect throughout) said that President Chirac's repeated calls for a Quartet meeting on the margins of the UNGA were meant to provide an alternative to the UNSC ministerial meeting on the Middle East proposed by the Arab League. He added that France intended the Quartet meeting to be a "symbolic gesture" that would produce a general re-affirmation of roadmap principles without being too specific. Besancenot assessed that the mutual weakness of Fatah and Hamas makes a Palestinian national unity government (NUG) likely despite this weekend's setbacks in internal Palestinian talks. Displaying some squishiness on the suspension of international aid to the Palestinian Authority and the isolation of Hamas, he summed up the difference between the U.S. and French approaches as: "We're betting on Hamas' evolution, not its collapse." Besancenot suggested a piecemeal approach to restoring confidence between Israel and the Palestinians, as opposed to the sequential process set forth in the roadmap. He also provided a quick summary of French thinking on Lebanon. End summary.

Symbolic Quartet Meeting  
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12. (C) During a September 18 introductory call by poloff, MFA DAS-equivalent Herve Besancenot said that President Chirac's repeated calls for a Quartet meeting on the margins of the UN General Assembly were intended to provide an alternative to the UNSC ministerial meeting on the Middle East proposed by the Arab League. "It's a way of telling the Arab League not to dream, to be realistic," said Besancenot, who added that

France intended the meeting to be a "symbolic gesture." He envisioned that the final product of such a meeting would be a general reaffirmation of the roadmap principles; given the complexities at the moment, he saw no need to be "too precise" about next steps. (Comment: The idea that a Quartet meeting would provide an alternative to the Arab League's proposed UNSC ministerial may simply have been for USG consumption. Hitherto, all indications were that France was amenable to the AL proposal. End comment.)

#### Douste-Blazy Trip to Ramallah

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¶3. (C) Turning to the Sept. 14 visit of Foreign Minister Douste-Blazy to Ramallah, Besancenot noted that Douste-Blazy cut his trip short after meeting with Palestinian Authority (PA) President Mahmoud Abbas as his intended Israeli interlocutors (FM Tzipi Livni, Prime Minister Olmert, Deputy PM Shimon Peres, and Labour Party leader Amir Peretz) were unavailable. "Nothing worked," said Besancenot with a shrug. (Note: FM Douste-Blazy's failure to meet with any Israeli interlocutor caught the attention of the French press and was raised at an MFA daily press briefing, which may be why Besancenot volunteered an explanation. End note.)

¶4. (C) Douste-Blazy's intent, said Besancenot, was to bolster Pres. Abbas at a time when "neither the Israeli nor Palestinian governments have the political courage necessary to make any courageous initiatives." Besancenot -- acknowledging that the USG has a different perspective -- said the French see an opportunity for progress on the Israeli-Palestinian track in the wake of the recent conflict between Israel and Hizballah. "We think the lesson that the Israeli public drew from the war is that Iran is now their number one enemy, and to limit Iran's influence it will be necessary to make some sort of gesture (toward the Palestinians)," he said. He assessed that the mutual weakness of Fatah and Hamas makes a Palestinian national unity government likely, notwithstanding the setbacks in NUG talks over the weekend. Expounding on Hamas's problems, he noted the continuing dichotomy between the terrorist group's Syrian-based leadership and its Gaza rank and file membership. Khalid Mishal remains ideological and "disconnected from the local reality" of Gaza, where Hamas officials take a more realistic line, as evidenced by their willingness to endorse the Prisoner's Agreement. Notwithstanding this internal discord, the population continues to support Hamas and blames the international community, not the Hamas government, for the economic crisis occasioned by the end of international assistance to the Palestinian Authority. Besancenot predicted that "if there were new elections tomorrow, Hamas would pick up even more seats" in the Palestinian Legislative Authority. Consequently, France has decided to bet on Hamas's evolution rather than its collapse. Assuming that Hamas does join a NUG and implicitly recognizes Israel, the MFA thinks the international community will need to "reflect about when to renew low-level contact with Hamas representatives." He displayed a similar squishiness on the suspension of international aid to the Hamas-led government, saying that "cutting aid only radicalizes the population."

#### The Quai Spots an Opening

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¶5. (C) Besancenot credited President Chirac with persuading President Abbas to travel to New York for the UNGA. He said that courageous initiatives require strong governments. Given that President Abbas and PM Olmert are both in difficult situations, and Washington appears unlikely (from a French perspective) to press for movement on the Israeli-Palestinian front at this time, Besancenot opined that the EU has an unusual degree of latitude at the moment to encourage the parties to make "partial progress." "We are not so naive as to expect that we can solve all of the big problems," said Besancenot, who added that, nevertheless, France sees an opportunity to help the parties progressively restore trust. Saying that the chief problem with the

Quartet-endorsed roadmap was its insistence on sequencing, an insistence that allows Israel to dodge its obligations while waiting in vain for absolute security, Besancenot advocated an approach based on piecemeal cooperation on questions of security, borders, refugees and Jerusalem. Such ad hoc cooperation could help to restore confidence where previous efforts focused solely on Palestinian security performance have failed. "What we don't want is for the Israelis to fall into the temptation of believing that the status quo can continue -- that they can manage low-intensity conflicts indefinitely," he summarized.

Lebanon

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16. (C) Turning to the situation in Lebanon, Besancenot noted that a recent conference of French ambassadors included much discussion of the regional consequences of the Israel-Hizballah conflict. The conference attendees generally agreed that Israel is not eager for another round of combat (although none doubted that Israel would respond given sufficient Hizballah provocation). By the same token, they assessed that Hizballah has been weakened militarily and is thus unlikely to re-initiate hostilities in the near future. The ambassadors opined that Tehran would prolong the lull both to help defuse internal Lebanese criticism of Hizballah's recklessness, and to find means of strengthening Hizballah's battered military structure despite the international arms embargo. However, there is a strong possibility of conflict re-emerging in the medium term as the core disputes remain unresolved. Besancenot therefore advocated exploiting the momentary calm to push for progress on the issues of Sheba Farms, the release of prisoners, and the demarcation of the Syrian-Lebanese border. He noted that France wants to preserve Lebanese National Assembly Speaker Nabih Berri as an alternative to Hizballah for Lebanon's Shia, would like to see the departure of President Lahoud but believes this must be managed subtly to avoid provoking violence, and expressed concern about the anti-PM Siniora machinations of Michel Aoun. With respect to Syria, Besancenot said that UNIIIC head Serge Brammertz is "our only strong leverage" and noted that France finds itself very much in the minority in trying to discourage other EU states from maintaining high-level contact with Damascus.

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